

The Free Lance-Star

BY DONNIE JOHNSTON/THE FREDERICKSBURG FREE LANCE-STAR

I have a TV package that allows me to get almost every Major League Baseball game played every day.

This is a far cry from the days before satellite TV, when you were lucky if you got one of your home team's games per week.

But even before there were at least eight cameras all around the ballpark, instant replay and a sophisticated production truck parked outside the gate, there was technology that brought baseball into American homes and cars. It was called radio.

Up in my attic there is an old gray radio, complete with tubes and capacitors that allowed me to listen to any number of baseball games when I was growing up.



This radio belonged to my Uncle Bill, and I asked for it when he died. Had I not, it would likely have been tossed in the trash—a worthless trifle in the modern world. To me, however, it holds great sentimental value.

Many a hot July or August afternoon I would sit in the front yard with Uncle Bill and listen to the old Washington Senators or the Baltimore Orioles play the Yankees or some other American League team.

Or we might listen to the Mutual Broadcasting System's Game of the Day with Bob Neal and Rex Barney, which aired (with different announcers) from 1935 until about the time the Dodgers and Giants moved to the West Coast. It was also about the time that television was overtaking radio as the medium of choice in American households.

Uncle Bill's stepson was an electrician and he rigged a line from the old farmhouse to a huge maple tree in the front yard. The wire ran down the tree to an electrical outlet at the base of the trunk. I have never seen such a setup before or since, but it worked.

The tree provided electricity for the radio and shade for Uncle Bill and me.

A red metal patio table on which to set the radio and a cold drink made for an ideal summer situation, especially during the heat of the day when there was nothing else to do.



Listening to baseball, however, wasn't limited to the afternoons. In the evenings, when the sun was getting low in the sky, Uncle Bill would bring his old gray radio outside and try to catch an evening game.

This would be a local broadcast and not a national one. Mutual's Game of the Day was exclusively an afternoon affair because most of its affiliates were small-town stations that either went off the air at sunset or greatly reduced power at night.

That's when we listened to the big boys: KMOX in St. Louis (Cardinals), WJR in Detroit (Tigers) or KDKA in Pittsburgh (Pirates).



We still often had to start out with Washington or Baltimore, however, because it was almost impossible to pull in those 50,000-watt giants until it got dark. So we would start out with WBAL in Baltimore and when it began to fade, the signals from the faraway stations were just beginning to get stronger.

There we would sit, the scream of the crowd in some faraway city intermingling with sound of the crickets in the adjoining hayfield and the call of a lonesome whippoorwill in the trees behind the chimney that once was Lim Sherman's house.

I don't recall us ever listening to an entire game. About 9 o'clock I would have to start the two-mile walk home and about 9:30 Aunt Emma would call, "Mr. Lowman, it is time for bed." (My aunt always called her husband "mister" unless she was mad. Then it was "Bill.")

Of course, listening to the ballgame out in the yard had its disadvantages. If it began to sprinkle, we were forced to unplug and run in a hurry. And then there were the occasional mosquitoes. But we really didn't care.

This was all AM radio, of course, and any thunderstorm within 20 miles created recurring static every time a bolt of lightning flashed. Without fail, that static would occur just at the moment the announcer would cry, "There's a long fly ball to deep left field. It is . . ." Sometimes it would take us five minutes to figure out what had happened.

Listening to baseball on the radio is a far cry from television. Back then I had to imagine just how far a Mickey Mantle home run traveled or how fast Bob Feller was actually throwing. With radio, your imagination took over, at least to a large extent.

I still occasionally listen to Washington games on the car radio, but that comes through on an FM station that is static free. It is not the same thing.

Back in the 1980s my friend, Lindsay Woolfolk, then head baseball coach at Louisa High School, told me that he would go out into his car at night and sit there in the driveway listening to ballgames. He, like me, never lost the thrill of hearing the action on radio.

Now I get static-free games on TV (there is not even the "snow" that was prevalent on those 1960s black and white telecasts) with instant replays, challenges and even guys dressed up like old presidents running around the warning track.

Still, at times I long to sit in the dark under Uncle Bill's maple tree and hear Harry Caray, Ernie Harwell or Bob Prince call the action while James Alvin Compton's hounds chased a fox in the woods next door.

Baseball was more exciting on the radio.